

Film Review

“Das Wunder von Bern,” directed by **Sönke Wortmann**

reviewed by **Dave Jennings**

N.B.: The following review is by *Global Game* reader **Dave Jennings**—**Bradford City** supporter and founder of the **Virtual Supporters' Club**—who attended a screening in the U.K. Already the movie, released in 2003, and the **1954 victory that was its inspiration** have been parsed by cultural critics for deeper meaning.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a member of the European Parliament, told the *New York Times* last year that “after 1945, the Germany identity was broken and there were two things that rebuilt it. One was economic growth and the other was the 1954 football championship” (see *The Global Game's* issue on **football and cinema**; link opens PDF). There is no word when the film will appear in the United States, but a viewing at a film festival or through one's local **Goethe-Institut** are likely the best bets.

Much of the story of *Das Wunder von Bern* (The miracle of Bern) focuses on the troubled relationship between 11-year-old **Matthias Lubanski** (played by **Louis Klamroth**) and his father, **Richard (Peter Lohmeyer)**, whom he meets for the first time when his father belatedly comes home from the Second World War. Richard has spent his youngest son's lifetime in Russian prison camps, first as a prisoner of war and then as a regular prisoner after having earned five more years for stealing a bag of sugar.

It is not a happy homecoming. Inevitably, Richard is traumatized, disoriented and bitter after his dreadful experiences. He is unable to return to work as a miner because the noise of the drilling brings on post-traumatic panic attacks. He is also unable initially to show warmth to a family that he does not know any more. The film's most poignant scene sees former prisoners arriving at a railway station, as relatives wait, hoping that their loved ones are on the train, some of the relatives clutching pictures taken in happier times. Richard Lubanski, looking frail and frightened, emerges from the train, sees a woman he thinks he recognizes, embraces her and whispers his wife's name: “Christa.” The woman hugs him, but then gently explains that she is actually his daughter **Ingrid (Birthe Wolter)**. The real **Christa (Johanna Gastdorf)** is tearfully watching and waiting nearby.

During his father's long absence, Matthias has adopted an alternative father figure: **Rot-Weiss Essen** and West Germany soccer star **Helmut Rahn (Sascha Göpel)**. This, clearly, was a more innocent age, when a friendship between a famous man and a young boy caused no questions to be asked, and when international soccer players did not travel everywhere by expensive car or luxury team bus; we see Matthias carrying Rahn's sports bag as Rahn goes to training. But Rahn assures his young friend that Matthias is more than just an unpaid porter. Matthias, he insists, is also a lucky charm.

Then the **1954 World Cup** comes along and provides a similar psychological boost for a West Germany still reeling from the catastrophic aftereffects of the war. One of those aftereffects was, of course, the division of Germany, and the World Cup in Switzerland represented the first of many major football adventures for the new nation of West Germany.

Das Wunder von Bern has some awkward political questions to deal with, and it handles them simply but adequately. Richard Lubanski's eldest son **Bruno (Mirko Lang)** is a Communist who, despite being unemployed, rejects a job offer on the grounds that his prospective boss is an ex-Nazi. When Bruno berates his father for having fought for the Nazis, Richard replies quietly that you had to do as you were told in those days. Eventually, as the conflict between father and elder son becomes intolerable, Bruno decides to flee to East Germany.

Meanwhile, the social divisions within 1950s' West Germany are illustrated by means of the contrast between the poverty in the mining community where the Lubanskis live and the far more privileged life of a sports reporter, **Paul Ackermann (Lucas Gregorowicz)**, who is covering the tournament in Switzerland. But *Wunder* is less about these large movements in history than it is about the smaller things that can make a huge difference to the morale of an individual or a nation—such as watching one's football team win.

The film reveals how the West Germans' triumph owed much to the canny tactical brain of their coach **Sepp Herberger**, a wry, witty character beautifully portrayed by **Péter Franke**. Herberger was given to making gnomic pronouncements: two of his most famous sayings, used in the film, translate as "the ball is round and the game lasts 90 minutes" and "after the match is before the match." But his shrewdness showed in some bold moves during the 1954 tournament, most notably fielding a weakened team in a first-round group game against the favorites, Hungary. Herberger's ploy led to his team suffering an 8–3 thrashing at the Hungarians' hands—but it also meant that they avoided a tough quarterfinal against Brazil, instead reaching the final via wins over Yugoslavia and Austria.

As the West German team moves closer to fulfilling its dream, so relationships in the Lubanski household steadily improve. A key moment comes when Richard, wandering alone, finds the football his younger son's friends have been playing with and spontaneously tries an overhead kick. Its success makes him smile for the first time in the film. Eventually, the fates of all the characters intertwine in a manner that is somewhat fanciful but nonetheless charming.

The on-pitch action in *Wunder* is limited to a skilful reenactment of key moments in the World Cup final in the film's closing minutes, but the atmosphere among the players in Switzerland and the fans back home in Germany is powerfully conveyed.

I saw *Das Wunder von Bern* in a British cinema in the week before England began their qualifying campaign for the **2006 World Cup finals**, which will be held in Germany, and on the way out I heard a fellow patron marvel at the skill it took to make a German film that makes English people want Germany to win the World Cup. This film pulled off that difficult trick by emphasizing the most universal positive aspects of the world's favorite sport: the excitement, pride and solidarity that can come from football.